

5 APR 1970

P-Coe, Richard L.
Sec. 4.01.4 Operation
Sidewinder

P-Shepard, Sean

Two Plays, Two Minds

And One Is the Season's Best

By Richard L. Coe

Within the last few weeks, two young playwrights have come into the hot New York spotlight, Robert Marasco, 33, and Sam Shepard, 26. In one's play there is more than meets the eye; in the other's, considerably less. But both are arresting writers.

Marasco has written the most satisfying new play I've seen this season, "Child's Play." David Merrick has mounted a production that, more than most, matches the script. So exceptional is such an occurrence that one later muses about the effects: Are they really in the writing or the performance?

They are, of course, in the writing and, in a sense, the limitations of the Shepard play confirm this.

To his "Operation Sidewinder," the Repertory Theater of Lincoln Center has given so spectacular a production that a mechanical snake, a couple of automobiles, and a slow-moving turntable keep grabbing our attention when we should be so occupied with Shepard's words that we take such curiosities for granted.

Both plays are richly symbolic yet totally different in style. Marasco is writing in a classic tradition; Shepard in pop art. Marasco's action is spread over some days, but played flowingly and without intermission; Shepard's adventure covers less time but his 12 scenes are punctuated by rock music played by five bearded fellows called The Holy Modal Rounders, creating a purposefully nervous jerking forward of the action.

"Child's Play," set in a Catholic boys' school, concerns the masters' observations about a curious evil that seems to be seeping through the school. The faculty includes laymen and

priests and though each has his faintly irritating habits, they get along reasonably well. The Mr. Chips of the common room is proud how the boys trust him and scorns the inhibited younger teacher of the classics.

Marasco has given all these men rich individuality and their talk is pleasurable, educated and literate but at the same time human. The boys are seen only as

shadowy figures in a marvelous pseudo-Gothic stairwell that must rank as one of designer Jo Mielziner's finest achievements. It serves the play so well that one feels the eddying currents are inevitable in his setting and lighting.

We are involved the instant this locale is revealed and we will become increasingly caught up as Marasco drives his carefully defined line toward his point. This, as the author succinctly defines it, is from "Oedipus Rex": "Phoebus, our lord, plainly orders us to drive out a defiling thing which, he says, has been harbored in this land."

By the time this contemporary story has been told the meaning is quite clear: Evil cannot be contained. It spreads. This seems to me worth saying and Marasco has said it with provocative, engrossing finesse.

"Operation Sidewinder" introduces us first to a red-eyed green snake in the Death Valley desert. A touring shutterbug is delighted with such a subject and when it coils around his wife he prefers finishing his picture-taking to rushing for help. When he does locate other people, a young man, long-haired and barefooted, shoots him dead. Meantime, the wife is raped by the snake.

Next we are in an Air Force office where inconsequential, sex and booze occupy the uniformed personnel until it's learned that a computer machine, which

and is disguised as a snake, is not where it should be.

In time this disappearance will involve three Black Power types, the CIA, a go-between and an Indian tribe. Their purposes are to poison a reservoir, to stop same, to make money and to revivify a lost god. Confusing? Well, I'm sure it's not confusing to Shepard and, always willing to go along with a playwright, I rather enjoyed drifting with his related if chaotic dozen scenes.

I'm perfectly capable of and willing to sacrifice coherence for mood and Shepard does create moods with his lively vocabulary and fertile imagination. No, I am not upset with Shepard's scrapbook format.

What I am upset about is his laziness. Does he really think that unfettered imagination is enough to make a play? Does he really think that by showing us how much he detests all human beings from tourists to drifters to the military, the CIA and Black Power goons he is going to arrest our interest? Am I over-sensitive to find his suggested sympathy for the Hopi Indians quite condescending? (In their ignorance, the Hopis are quite wrong about their sidewinder snake.)

One way to help playwright Shepard would be for Lincoln Center to have used a few dollars of its production costs to buy him seats for the Marasco play. He would learn that part of the art of drama is understatement.

He would also learn that by writing roles of substance he would benefit himself and actors. Of the cast of 36 that Michael A. Schultz directed at Lincoln Center, there is very little to be said of its acting except that they say their lines and only occasionally, on purpose, bump into the furniture.

Of the 15 players that Joseph Hardy directed at the Royale Theatre production of "Child's Play," I could go on for pages: Pat Hingle's finest acting in years as the shaken Mr. Chips; Fritz Weaver's control (if not his diction) as the neurotic; Ken Howard's basketball coach; David Rounds' hilariously dry priest; Peter MacLean's fretsome Irishman; Michael McGuire's headmaster, determined but weak.

When the Tony is handed out Sunday night the 19th, for the season's best new play, it's highly likely that "Child's Play" will be it.